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ABSTRACT

One of the most disconcerting findings of researchers who have looked at the way writers write is that their processes bear little resemblance to what is expected of students in the classroom. Some aspects of the lesson that do not correspond to our current understanding of the composing process are (1) providing no time for the conception and incubation of ideas, (2) allowing no opportunity for the use of expressive language, (3) assigning topics of little interest to the students, (4) using an oversimplified formula for composing, (5) relying on a stiff form of outlining as a necessary first step in composing, and (6) attempting to improve writing by focusing on the elimination of errors. Teachers must help students realize that writing is a process of discovery, a way of revealing their own thoughts. They must also keep in mind how varied the writing process can be, both from writer to writer and from task to task. The writing program should be flexible enough to accommodate the composing processes with which students have experienced success, while at the same time providing them with opportunities for experiencing alternate strategies which they may adopt as part of their personal repertoire. (HOD)

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ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THE WRITING PROCESS

A Paper Presented at the
Canadian Council of Teachers of English
Conference at Halifax, Nova Scotia
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by

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In writing, as in thinking, a completely unexpected juxtaposition of ideas or information may cause us to view familiar things in fresh ways. For instance, while thinking about the composing process during an early stage of preparing this paper, I happened to re-read the following poem by Stephen Crane.

> In the desert
> I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
> Who, squatting upon the ground,
> Held his heart in his hands,
> And ate of it.
> I said, "Is it good, friend?"
> "It is bitter—bitter," he answered;
> "But I like it
> Because it is bitter,
> And because it is my heart."[1]

While I had read the poem previously many times—in fact, it is a favorite of mine — I had never before realized just how striking an image of Man the Writer it presents. Most people engaged in writing, I am sure, at one time or another have felt that it was a lonely, elemental, self-exposing and self-consuming process, but that this bitter work was ultimately satisfying, perhaps for the very reasons that made it painful.

Another poem by Crane will almost surely strike a responsive chord in anyone who has tried to grapple with expressing personal thought and experience through the medium of writing.

> Many red devils ran from my heart
> And out upon the page.
> They were so tiny
> The pen could mash them
> And many struggled in the ink.

It was strange
To write in this red muck
Of things from my heart.[2]

The purpose of this session, in general, is to discuss mashing little red devils. More specifically, we will explore the nature of the composing process and consider classroom implications of our discoveries. During the course of the workshop I will invite you to provide insights into your own composing processes, to do some composing, and to share ideas about teaching writing.

During the past few years it seems our profession has become fascinated with exploring the process of composing. One of the most disconcerting findings of researchers who have looked at the way real writers write is that their processes bear little resemblance to what we have sometimes expected our students to do in our classrooms. Somehow the accumulated wisdom about the teaching of writing passed on by generations of teachers, guided by all the standard texts, managed to ignore the fact that professional writers, the teachers themselves, and many of our students did not and could not write the way we advocated. In fact, the amazing thing was that so many students did manage to learn to write that way.

To get an idea of how far we've come in our understanding of the teaching of writing, let's eavesdrop on a younger and slimmer John Oster teaching a composition class to high school students about twenty years ago.

Good morning class. Take out your composition notebooks. Today I want you to write an essay on one

of the following topics from page 74 of your text: My Most Embarrassing Moment, The Ideal School, My Favorite Poet. There, that should give you plenty of scope, eh? Oh, Waldo, you always groan when I announce the topics, but writing isn't all that hard is it? And learning how to write an essay properly now will help you immeasurably in later life.

Now you all know how to organize your outline, don't you? Remember that the first paragraph introduces your topic, the next three paragraphs present and develop your ideas, and the final paragraph sums things up and concludes with a ring of finality. I was planning to bring in a couple of good magazine articles for you to use as models, but I couldn't find any that were organized properly. Maybe I'll find some for Friday's class.

Most of you did two things wrong on your last essays and I want you to keep them in mind as you work today. First, many of you didn't indent properly in your outlines. Here's the way it should be done:

I. Topic Sentence

A. Main Idea

1. Supporting Idea

a. Detail

Secondly, when you are doing your outlines remember you must write down your ideas in parallel form. Okay, you'd better get started. There's just forty minutes left in the period.

What's the matter now Waldo? What do you mean you don't know what to write? I just told you you could write on any

one of those three topics on the blackboard. You don't know how? Why, I've just shown you how. Now stop being obstreperous and get to work. You only have thirty-five minutes left. That will give you about twenty minutes to do the outline and fifteen minutes to write out your essay. Remember, I want everyone's essay in by the end of this period, so I can get them all marked by Monday. I want to be able to show you what you did wrong in this essay before you do your next one. . . .

Cut. I am sure that was a sufficiently long look into my capabilities and procedures as a high school composition teacher to demonstrate why I now teach English methods courses! The above account, of course, is intended to illustrate a number of thoroughly forgettable procedures which have all too frequently been used in the teaching of composition. Before we abandon our teacher from the past, perhaps we could take a moment to identify some aspects of the lesson which do not correspond to our current understanding of the composing process. Among the many negative aspects of the lesson are the following:

- providing no time for the conception and incubation of ideas
- allowing no opportunity for the use of expressive language, either oral or written, out of which the transactional writing demanded might be expected to grow
- assigning topics which probably are of little interest to students
- stressing the future rather than the present value of writing
- using an over-simplified formula for composing a form of writing seldom found in published sources

- relying heavily on a stiff, ritualistic form of outlining as a necessary first step in composing.
- attempting to improve writing by focussing almost exclusively on the elimination of errors.

Most, if not all, of the problems with this teacher's approach stem from a basic conceptual error—the belief that writing is merely recording, not generating and processing, thought.

Donald Murray points out that many of our problems as teachers of composition result from the fact that we were trained as and view ourselves as teachers of literature.

> Most of us are trained as English teachers by studying a product: writing. Our critical skills are honed by examining literature, which is finished writing; language as it has been used by authors. And then, fully trained in the autopsy, we go out and are assigned to teach our students to write, to make language live.
>
> Naturally we try to use our training. It's an investment and so we teach writing as a product, focusing our critical attentions on what our students have done, as if they had passed literature in to us. It isn't literature, of course, and we use our skills, with which we can dissect and sometimes almost destroy Shakespeare or Robert Lowell to prove it.
>
> Our students knew it wasn't literature when they passed it in, and our attack usually does little more than confirm their lack of self-respect for their work and for themselves; we are as frustrated as our students, for conscientious, doggedly responsible, repetitive autopsying doesn't give birth to live writing. . . . No matter how careful our criticisms, they do not help the student since when we teach composition we are not teaching a product, we are teaching a process.[3]

Murray is just one of a growing number of English educators who are advocating that we learn more about how writers really go about the process of writing and that we use this knowledge in our teaching of writing. Relying on the data which Michael Benton of the University of Southampton has

gathered about the composing processes of well-known poets and authors, Anthony Adams of Cambridge University identifies the following stages in the composing process:

Preparation: being in a relaxed and receptive state of mind, doing plenty of unfettered, free writing and engaging in reading and talking about the subject in which the writer himself is interested. "The need to share our experiences, after all, is the real motivating force behind writing, and quite certainly, for most of us, writing in its earliest stages is essentially a collaborative rather than a solitary activity."[4]

Incubation: "a period of gestation, a lull in which the writer needs to go away and allow the piece of writing to take shape of its own accord."[5]

Illumination: "the stage in which the things that bubbled up from the deep recesses of our being into our mind begin to take shape."[6]

Resolution: the final stage which involves making a decision about whether the piece of work is worthy of completion, and if the answer is affirmative, redrafting, shaping, and polishing it into a final, complete piece of writing.

Although research into the composing process is really just getting started, various models of the process have been proposed and a number of the stages in the process have been identified. However, because writers vary greatly in their methods, because various researchers use different terminology to describe the same stages, and possibly most of all because we are trying to describe a process which is extremely complex

and difficult to study objectively, there exists in the literature no commonly accepted standard set of stages in the composing process. In fact, we are at the rather exciting stage in our understanding of the field when teachers of writing and their students can share in discovery about how people compose through sharing insights about their writing. One participant in a workshop I conducted at Grande Prairie in Northern Alberta told me he used the following terminology in discussing the writing process with his students: Inspiration, Wasteland, Workshop, Garden of Eden. A closer examination of this four-stage model revealed that in many ways it was similar to the one described by Anthony Adams which I have just outlined.

Donald Murray, unlike some theoreticians who have developed highly complex rhetorical models, uses a simple three-stage model of the composing process. Murray is himself a publishing writer and his theories of composition are based on the insights he has into his own work and on the comments of other writers about their work. In his earlier writing Murray simply used the terms <u>prewriting</u>, <u>writing</u>, and <u>rewriting</u> to designate what he sees as an essentially three stage process. More recently he has begun to refer to the same three stages as <u>prevision</u>, <u>vision</u>, and <u>revision</u>.[7] The first stage refers to all those preparatory activities a writer engages in prior to writing the first draft. The second stage involves writing the first draft or what Peter Drucker calls "the zero draft" and Murray calls "the discovery draft". The final stage, revision, includes all the things the writer does to alter, develop, and improve the original draft.

Janet Emig, in comparing the self-sponsored and school-sponsored writing of grade twelve students concluded that one of the biggest problems with the school-sponsored writing was that almost all the emphasis was placed on the writing stage and the prewriting and rewriting stages were typically severely truncated.[8] Conversely, when students were doing self-sponsored writing, writing they really cared about, like professional writers they spent far more time in prevision and revision than they did in the actual writing stage.

If we turn to professional writers for information about their composing processes, the first thing that will probably strike us is that almost invariably it is the discovery aspect of writing that excites them the most. We are all no doubt aware of E. M. Forster's famous question, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" That this process of discovery is central to the writing process is substantiated by the fact that Donald Murray is able to provide quotations from 47 established writers stressing that for them writing is discovering.[9] For example, C. D. Lewis is quoted as follows:

> First, I do not sit down at my desk to put into verse something that is already clear in my mind. If it were clear in my mind, I should have no incentive or need to write about it . . . . we do not write in order to be understood; we write in order to understand.[10]

What we are really doing then when we are helping our students develop their composing processes is teaching them a process of discovery, a way of revealing their own thoughts. If we could demonstrate to our students that writing is really a process of discovery, we might be able to generate in them

some of the enthusiasm and respect for writing that authors typically have for their craft. Students are usually fascinated by William Faulkner's description of his composing process:

> It begins with a character, usually, and once he stands up on his feet and begins to move, all I do is trot along behind him with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long enough to put down what he does and says.[11]

You might be successful in having your students experience some of the excitement of Faulkner's approach by trying the following activity. Ask each student to concentrate fully on developing as clear as possible a mental image of a character by answering questions such as: What age is your character? Which sex? What does he or she look like physically? What is he or she like in terms of personality and character? What is your character's occupation or status in society? In what kind of living quarters does your character reside? Who are his or her preferred companions? What past experiences have had a great impact on your character's life? What thoughts tend to occupy your character's mind? Have students form groups of two and describe their character to their partner. After both characters have been described, ask each pair of students to write a story involving their two characters. Usually the stories develop very rapidly, almost spontaneously, as the partners compose in collaboration, occasionally role-playing, frequently interspersing bursts of writing with animated conversation. Bringing together characters who are often very different in age, socio-economic status, and values

tends to result in stories which neither of the two authors would have thought of writing individually. Developing the stories around the natural actions of the characters as they interact also tends to produce more sensitively drawn relationships than one usually finds in student writing, which all too frequently appears to be modelled after stereotyped television shows.

In moving away from an emphasis on product to an emphasis on process, the teacher of writing must constantly keep in mind how varying that process can be, both from writer to writer and from task to task. All of us as writers have our own distinctive ways of going about a composing task. Some of us may do a great deal of internal rehearsing prior to writing, then write quite rapidly and fluently. Some of us may write slowly and laboriously, pausing frequently to reread what we have written and revising carefully as we go. Some of us may be like Bryant Fillion, who in speaking about his own composing process in a luncheon speech at this conference stated, "I find I have very little to say but a great deal to add." Such writers may compose a relatively rapid, sketchy "zero draft" or "discovery draft," which they greatly expand and drastically revise in subsequent drafts.

Regardless of how they compose, writers who care about their work place great value on the revision stage. In fact, many writers, particularly poets, find shaping and polishing their work one of the most enjoyable aspects of the composing

process. One of our biggest challenges as teachers of writing is to give our students reasons to care about their work enough to enter wholeheartedly into this potentially satisfying activity.

As we consider aspects of the composing process which we are aware of as writers but which we may not have fully explored in research nor utilized in teaching, three items come to mind: voice, rehearsal, and ritual.

When teachers suddenly take particular notice of one student's paper as they are ploughing through a large pile of student writing, chances are their attention was caught because that student was communicating in a "voice" which seemed unusually alive or authentic. As we compose we are aware of an "inner voice" formulating, questioning, reformulating. Sometimes, if we are lucky, the inner voice seems to take over and the writing speeds along, although not necessarily in the manner we foresaw. Perhaps we intended to adopt a serious, thoughtful tone in examining the topic, but the inner voice became playful or impassioned. If we had the confidence to give it free rein, our inner voice may have produced for us a piece of writing quite unlike, but perhaps superior to, in terms of vitality and originality, that which we had intended. While we are probably most fully aware of its presence in relatively dramatic circumstances such as the one I have just described, our inner voice is with us in all our writing, serving not only as the dictator whose words we transcribe, but also as the surrogate audience

who criticizes and discusses our work with us. We need to help our students develop the use of their inner voices in both these roles if they are to become confident, effective writers and "their own best critics." One way of assisting them in this respect, as James Britton has taught us, is by encouraging them to do more expressive writing, both for its own sake and as a preliminary stage in transactional and poetic writing.[12]

As writers, we probably know from experience that much of our composing happens not on paper but in mental "rehearsal." This rehearsal may happen long before we ever start writing or in the final act of revision; it may occur just before we fall asleep, just after we wake up, or as we sit at our writing desk; it may be deliberate or unbidden. It is extremely difficult for researchers to study, but extremely valuable in the process of creation. Even though we may have trouble studying it objectively, our students need to be made aware of the possibilities of this aspect of composing. Assignments can be set up so students can more fully employ mental rehearsal as well as the more obvious forms of rehearsal, such as talking with peers, prewriting activities, and writing conferences.

Ritual also plays a key role in the composing process of most writers, although its role is seldom well-recognized in the classroom. Consider the last paper you wrote. Did you have to have just the right kind of paper and writing utensil before you started? Did you chain-smoke? Did you

need a mug of coffee or a snifter of brandy constantly by your left hand? Did you pause frequently to sharpen an already sharp pencil, to get a snack, or to putt a few golf balls across the carpet? Did you have to write in a familiar place with just the right amount of solitude or distraction? Was there a specific time in the writing process when you felt you really had to abandon your pen or pencil in favor of your typewriter or vice-versa? While these particular actions may not be part of your writing routine, chances are you engage in similar rituals as you struggle with the process of composing.

It's not easy to determine what subconscious or unconscious motivations may lie behind some of our writing rituals. No doubt many of them are mere diversions which may actually inhibit our writing. Some rituals, however, are probably genuinely helpful in putting us in a thoughtful and creative mood, receptive to our inner voice. Some of them may be delaying tactics, providing us with reasons for putting off starting a writing task for which the incubation period has been too short. Some of them may be useful diversions which we adopt to avoid the frustration of staring blankly at a sheet of white paper. Besides, the human mind has a strange leprechaun quality. Concentrate too hard on finding inspiration and it won't appear; turn your attention to something else and inspiration may appear unexpectedly. This fascinating phenomenon is aptly described in a definition by Thornton Wilder: "Writing is a coy game you play with your unconscious."[13]

The more we become aware of the composing processes of professional writers, our students, and ourselves, the greater will be our opportunity to make our classrooms places where our students can engage in the discovery of their own thoughts. We need classrooms where teachers and students write together, talk together about their writing, and talk together about how they write. As James Britton suggests, much of the writing should be done for peers and teacher-as-trusted-adult rather than just for teacher-as-examiner.[14] The writing program should be flexible enough to accommodate the composing processes with which students have experienced success, while at the same time providing them with opportunities for experiencing alternate strategies which they may adopt as part of their personal repertoire. Writing well is neither simple nor easy. (To portray it as such merely discourages students who find it particularly difficult.) Rather, it is a complex process through which we can gain great satisfaction, for as Henry Miller states, "Writing, like life itself, is a great voyage of discovery."[15]

Notes

[1]Stephen Crane, The Black Riders, 3rd ed., (Boston: Copeland and Day, 1896), p. 3.

[2]Ibid., p. 49.

[3]Donald M. Murray, "Teach Writing as a Process not Product," in Rhetoric and Composition: A Handbook for Teachers, ed. Richard L. Graves (Rochelle Park, N. J.: Hayden, 1976), p. 79.

[4]John Oster, "A Second Look at Creative Writing: An Interview with Anthony Adams," Alberta English, 18: 2 (Fall 1979), p. 29.

[5]Ibid., p. 28.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Donald M. Murray, "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery," in Research on Composing: Points of Departure, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Ill.: N.C.T.E., 1978), pp. 86-89.

[8]Janet Emig, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (Urbana, Ill.: N.C.T.E., 1971).

[9]Murray, "Internal Revision," p. 101-103.

[10]Ibid., p. 102.

[11]Ibid., p. 101.

[12]James Britton, Language and Learning (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970).

[13]James Britton, T. Burgess, N. Martin, A. McLeod, and H. Rosen, The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (London: Macmillan Education, 1975).

[14]Leonard L. Levinson, Bartlett's Unfamiliar Quotations (Chicago: Cowles, 1971), p. 334.

[15]Murray, "Internal Revision," p. 102.